

how to live my own life here (when all i need is home)

by [jibberjabber599](#)

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Summary:

Her life is weird now, but good. Good enough. Her stepdad still yells, but Billy becomes bearable. She still misses her dad, who promises a visit that likely won't happen during one of his rare phone calls.

She has a group of friends and she doesn't constantly spend her time alone on a skateboard missing California or immersing herself in beating her own high score on Dig Dug.

(Now when she plays, the boys and Eleven stand behind her, cheering her on.)

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Max is used to feeling like she could easily be discarded—like she's only tolerated but never truly *wanted*.

Her mom seems to try her best, Max will give her that. But her mom's effort tends to be wasted on attempting (futilely) to convince her daughter to wear a dress or let her fix her hair, and well, that's not something she'd willingly participate in. Her mom then resorts to compromise, asking Max to at least ditch the track jacket and sweatshirts and scuffed-up sneakers, but that fails as well.

Max knows her mom loves her in her own way, she just wishes her mom loved her as she was.

She avoids her stepdad like the plague, and thankfully he makes that easy with how often she's foisted upon Billy—Billy, who she *wishes* she could avoid like the plague.

They ignore each other well enough, but he's never avoidable and doesn't miss a chance to take out his anger on the easiest target.

Sometimes she wishes her dad had just let her stay, but she guesses that would've been too difficult—too difficult to fight her mom for custody, too difficult to keep dealing with her mom and stepdad, too difficult to raise a daughter alone.

Or maybe she simply wasn't worth it. It doesn't hurt, not really. Hurt is hearing your stepdad berate your stepbrother as he slaps him

around in the other room and realizing with a shiver down your spine that it'll be taken out on you later the second you manage to piss him off.

(A thing that's incredibly easy to do, as Max knows her existence pisses him off.)

But it somehow manages to be a thorn in her side how Mike makes his disdain for her mere presence in his little group painfully clear. Eleven's dismissal of her stings even more, considering she hadn't even met her.

But none of that should even register because they could all very well die, and she's still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that Lucas' story was not exaggerated in the slightest, but it *does* register. And it hurts.

It's not like she sets out to prove herself and more that she's tired of Billy's abuse, of him hurting her friends, but the rush of pride at the awed (and feared) looks on the boys' slack-jawed faces as she clutches Billy's keys almost outweighs the urgency of the situation, them all scrambling around to haphazardly bandage Steve up and carry him out when Dustin *insists* he needs to tag along.

Then they all make it out alive from the tunnels, the relief that *everyone* is safe now flooding her, and she figures Steve's going to be just fine despite his banged-up, blood-crusting face when he asks for her to give him the keys to drive back to the Byers'.

("Are you *positive* you should be driving while concussed?" Dustin

had argued. “Head injuries are not to be taken lightly.”

“Concussed or not, last I checked, I’m the only one with a license,” Steve had replied as he slid into the driver’s seat, ordering them to get in. “Plus, I’m pretty sure you little shits jostled my brains out during the ride over here,” he’d muttered as he’d started the ignition.)

And she can’t help but think, now what?

Nothing can ever be the same again—normal—now that her eyes have been opened to all this. She recalls Lucas’ story, wonders how they all pretended and acted like everything was back to normal the first time?

Not only that, but the girl that completed their party had come back. After all, she’d been repeatedly reminded they already had a mage and didn’t need (*want*) a zoomer.

So, where’d that leave her?

Max is familiar with hurt and fear, but not like the caliber of what just occurred. Not like the fear that had gripped her earlier, left her trembling and quaking in its wake. But she’s alive, sitting in the backseat of her stepbrother’s car, with this new group of friends, after the world seemed close to ending...

Now what?

Dustin called dibs for the passenger seat, so the rest of them are squashed in the back. She made sure to have Lucas squeeze into the middle, between her and Mike, her leg developing a cramp as she practically plasters her entire body against the door to give them all room. Space to breath, to think, to process, as the road beneath them jostles her every now and then.

The silence is a little awkward—especially *Dustin* having nothing to say—but all she wants to focus on is how the coolness of the window is refreshing against her sweat-slickened, dirty skin, when it's broken by a hesitant clearing of the throat.

She nearly expects it to be the boy beside her, but instead it's the boy beside him who speaks up. "That was pretty bad-ass back there," Mike says, and she nearly hums in agreement, expecting them all to join in. They *had* all made it out of that hole with a pulse, and she's still hasn't fully digested any of it, her mind completely boggled. "I mean, the way you beat up your brother," he clarifies a second later.

She can't claim she isn't shocked by the praise, how it oddly seems like some seal of approval, but her reaction is kneejerk. "*Step*-brother," she corrects in distaste, then barely suppresses a smile.

"Wait, *what*?" Steve bursts out, peering at them from the rearview mirror, his pupils dancing back and forth. "What are you guys talking about?"

Dustin wastes no time giving Steve a play-by-play, and she nearly expects Steve to screech Billy's car to a halt when he yells out another stunned, "*What*?" when Dustin arrives at the whole stabbing-

in-the-neck-with-a-needle and Billy being successfully tranquilized part.

“It was awesome,” Lucas chimes in as he stirs next to her, softly knocking his knee against hers once, then twice, and she doesn’t have to look at him to know he’s grinning.

She doesn’t bother hiding her own smile as she watches Steve have a mini-meltdown over the events that transpired when he was knocked out cold. How he could freak out over that after all they went through is unbelievable. “You know, I’ve only known you a few hours but I think you’ve found your true calling. You’re a natural at babysitting,” she tells him, the boys erupting into laughter and teasing as he cracks a smile.

She nudges her knee against Lucas’ one more time.

“So, we pretend none of what happened...actually happened?”

She hears Lucas and Mike furiously whispering behind her, like something’s a secret again, and she nearly turns around to call them out on it until she catches Lucas telling Mike he should apologize to her.

He doesn't, that first week after. He's clearly pleased Will and Eleven are safe and back, so she doubts she's a priority. She honestly doesn't hold it against him, even if his attitude towards her did get grating at times.

"Basically," Dustin answers when he realizes no one else is paying enough attention to, shrugging when she gives him a bug-eyed look. "Most of it, at least."

Someone bumps into Will before she can sputter out a response, and Will only flinches when he's told to *get out of the way, Zombie Boy*.

Something about the action, or maybe Will's passiveness, triggers something in her, and she blurts out, "Why don't you watch where *you're* going, you dick?" to the kid and his own little clique before they can stroll away, laughing at the taunt.

She ends up getting dragged into the principal's office that day, her lip swollen and busted from someone's bony elbow after they all ended up in a tussle that resulted in her getting hauled off of the bully. She's let off with a warning, since the bullying of Will Byers isn't exactly a secret to the faculty at this small school.

She assumes sticking up for Will is why Mike pulls her aside after school while the others walk on, Lucas and Dustin turning around briefly to flash them an encouraging smile and thumbs up respectively.

It isn't until Mike is stammering and stuttering that she realizes he's trying to apologize.

She doesn't want to make it easy for him after being shut out and dismissed multiple times, but she helps him along anyway. "You?" she urges, shifting her skateboard under her arm as he squirms.

"I'm sorry, Max," he finally sighs, before repeating it, more genuine this time. "I'm sorry for how I treated you. I acted like a jerk."

She nods slowly in agreement, acts like she's considering the apology just to see him squirm uncomfortably for a few seconds more. "You *were* a jerk. But it's okay," she drops her skateboard, skating towards the group before yelling at Mike to catch up.

Her official introduction to Jane "Eleven" Hopper goes a little something like this:

It's Eleven's first day in the public school system. She's introduced by their homeroom teacher as Jane, but her friends will only refer to her as Eleven or El. Max thinks she's pretty damn lucky to already have an established group of friends before her first day of school.

She's more than a little surprised when Eleven doesn't ignore her, but rather meets her at her locker, holding her hand out in front of her awkwardly, practically bidding Max to take it with her stare. "I'm Jane," she says simply.

No one in the group calls her Jane, a fact that isn't missed by Max.

"Max," she replies, biting her lip in contemplation as she shakes the girl's hand once. "I think the name Eleven is way cooler," she blurts out when her hand falls to her side, and she can't be certain, but she *thinks* she spots the corner of the girl's lip twitch in an almost-smile before she turns away to find Mike.

A few days later, in the lunchroom, Eleven admits she was the reason behind Max falling off the skateboard in the gym to the group. The boys look back and forth between them in silence, almost like they're anticipating a fight or for her to get mad. But then Eleven apologizes just as Mike had, sincerely, and Max figures keeping a grudge would be pointless.

After all, she's pretty sure Eleven could beat her in a fight, using only her mind. It's both awesome and terrifying, and Max tells her so.

When they all meet up the next time at the arcade, El approaches her, asking her to teach her how to play Dig Dug.

“Is your asshole stepbrother here?” Lucas whispers when she invites him in, his voice so low that she can barely hear him above the music Billy has blasting in the living room.

She rolls her eyes. “You rung my doorbell like twelve times last time when I warned you not to come over. I wouldn’t have said it was okay if it wasn’t. He won’t bother us, trust me.”

“I was trying to prove I wasn’t making it up. And that was a Code Red situation!” He steps in cautiously, eyeing Billy who continues to work out, not paying them any mind.

But she makes sure to make a show of grabbing Lucas’ hand in plain sight when she asks Billy to turn down his music. Her stepbrother stares them down long enough for her to pick up on how uncomfortable Lucas is, but she stands her ground, squeezing his fingers.

Billy turns the music down, and she presses her lips tightly together in hopes that she won’t burst out into laughter. But when Lucas mutters something about how he was probably scared she’d go get Steve’s baseball bat and beat his ass, she can’t contain her amusement.

Her mom is delighted, practically falling over herself, when Max announces she's going to the Snow Ball, immediately exclaiming that a new dress was in order.

She tells everyone during a rare family dinner, Billy slouching in his chair across from hers and her stepdad uninterested in her news, only inserting himself into the conversation to order Billy to sit up properly as if he were a young child.

She bites her tongue, holding back a groan of despair when she realizes that her mom will *definitely* try to go overboard with this, fussing over her dress and fixing up her hair.

"Oh Maxine, honey, do you have a date?" her mom asks excitedly later.

She cringes at her full name, but her face flushing betrays her even through her denial. Her mom thankfully keeps the teasing to a minimal. It's technically the truth, though she supposed both she and Lucas had an unspoken understanding that they'd end up there together and would probably dance. Maybe.

At least, *she* didn't want to dance with anyone else.

She wonders if it's also his first kiss.

And she figures if she could muster the courage to press her lips to his, she could ask him a question. "Why didn't you ask me? You know, to this, the Snow Ball," she clarifies when she pulls away and sees his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"I didn't want to be *presumptuous*," he replies with a toothy grin, and it's contagious, a giggle spilling from her lips.

"You're such a nerd, Stalker."

"I hate to break it to you, but you kinda are, too, Mad-Max." She likes how he says it, sort-of affectionately, and they're barely even swaying to the music now. "I like you that way."

"Me, too," she confesses softly, and she'd never admit it aloud, but it's the most perfect dance she could've imagined.

Her life is weird now, but good. Good enough. Her stepdad still yells, but Billy becomes bearable. She still misses her dad, who promises a visit that likely won't happen during one of his rare phone calls.

She has a group of friends and she doesn't constantly spend her time alone on a skateboard missing California or immersing herself in beating her own high score on Dig Dug.

(Now when she plays, the boys and Eleven stand behind her, cheering her on.)

But she has nightmares every now and again.

Sometimes it's about being trapped in that abandoned bus in the junkyard, the terror so consuming she can't breathe when she looks up and sees the monster—*demo-dog*—growling above her. Sometimes it's about hearing the screeching at the Byers' house, knowing doom is approaching.

But she always has a hand to hold in them, someone beside her to remind her that she wasn't alone.

Isn't alone.

"You know, you're like, *totally tubular*," she teases Lucas as she circles around him on her skateboard, imitating his intonation

flawlessly.

The temperature is freezing, so vastly different than the warmth of the Californian sun she grew up under, and she can see the puffs of Lucas' breath when he chuckles. "I say it better than you do," he gloats.

She puts her foot down on the concrete, stopping in front of him. "And that's what makes you cool, Lucas."

It's so cold she shivers even with her jacket zipped up, but he walks her home after school, pushing his bike, her skateboard tucked under her arm.

It's preferable to the warmth of Billy's car.